



*Introductory address delivered by Professor Frank McGuinness, UCD School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin on 13 December 2010, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa on Maureen Toal*

Maureen Toal is one of Ireland's most respected and most loved performers. She has appeared many times on film and television, winning particular fame in the long running series *Glenroe* on RTE. But her first love is the stage, and the history of her distinguished career illuminates the history of our theatre from when she first joined the Abbey Company as a sixteen year old student in 1946. She remains a member of that Company to this day. Her earliest appearances at the Abbey, together with her late, lamented contemporary, Joan O'Hara, include *The Visiting House* and, in the most successful of Louis Dalton's many plays, *They Got What They Wanted*, where Maureen played with two of the Abbey's most brilliant talents, FJ Mc Cormack and Eileen Crowe, learning much from each of them of the great histrionic traditions that have sustained the performing arts in this country.

Maureen Toal also gave outstanding interpretations of parts drawn from the canon of Irish drama, establishing her name in the most demanding roles of Synge and O'Casey. Her *Widow Quin* is still revered in the memory of those who saw it, but her deepest instincts drew her to the works of her fellow Dubliner, Sean O'Casey. The clarity, sympathy, concentration and energy of her *Bessie Burgess*, *Juno* and especially, *Mrs Tancred*, were master classes in embodying how O'Casey's language is an instrument of fierce precision, requiring extraordinary sharpness of technique and depth of feeling, one dependent on the mastery of the other for that mighty heart, that colossal humanity at the burning core of O'Casey's writing to erupt with shattering effect.

She has used her experience in these classical roles of her native tradition to expand her range. During the 1950's and 1960's under the inspired direction of key figures such as Tomas Mac Anna and Ray Mc Anally, Maureen first confronted on the Dublin stage the challenging demands of leading American playwrights, Edward Albee, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Playing Martha in *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*, Maureen Toal took Irish acting to new levels exploring the authenticity of despair. Her Maggie in *After The Fall* shouldered the sorrow and loneliness of Marilyn Monroe, on whom Arthur Miller had based his play. Her Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* rooted that most shifting of plays in the profound grief of sisterly love and guilt.

She served these dramatists brilliantly, as she did a later generation of Irish authors. She has given superlative performances in the theatre of Brian Friel, particularly in the title role of *The Loves Of Cass Maguire*. She has taken the lead in my plays *The Factory Girls* and in the monologue, *Baglady*, where she told the toughest of stories with devastating honesty. Her comic skills are legion, and for her Hugh Leonard created many important works, including *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, *The Great Big Blonde* and *A Life* where together with Cyril Cusack she distilled the sense of loss that detailed the courage of a choice that propelled her character to say no to love she could not share nor feel. She created the part of Mame Fadden in one of John B. Keane's most demanding plays, *The Change In Mame Fadden*. In each of these roles she would be first to acknowledge the power of the company ensemble, the very basis of Abbey acting, and the insights gained by working with directors of the calibre of Joe Dowling and Patrick Mason.

Courage is the quality that bursts through in all great acting. The power to tell a life story, to look that life in the face, and not to, never to flinch even at the roughest times – this is the source of strength at the root of Maureen Toal's art. Her fellow actors know better than any hers is the look out of which were fashioned the masks of comedy and tragedy, the look that has seen it all, said it all, suffered it all and instinctively, infinitely comes back for more, because that is how she as a woman, and we as her race, have survived.

Hers is the lifeblood of our theatre, its mother, its protector. She is our greatest actress. She is Maureen Toal.

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Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.